

Rob Sykes with contributions from friends, *The LMS Occupation: Oxford's 1998 urban road protest*, Oxford: Ed Pope History, 2024, 36pp, £5, available by contacting ed@edpopehistory.co.uk

In September 2023, a fascinating and informative exhibition was held at Community Works, 21 Park End Street, Oxford, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the occupation by road protesters of Oxford's former Rewley Road London Midland and Scottish (LMS) railway station building, prior to its demolition and re-erection at the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre at Quainton. This historically-significant building was replaced by the University's Saïd Business School. This lively and well-illustrated thirty-six page publication is a follow-up to the exhibition. The book describes in detail the events surrounding what must arguably be the most remarkable and ingenious popular protest that Oxford has ever witnessed. It is written by Rob Sykes, a veteran of the occupation, with help from his fellow protesters.

The book begins its story in 1989 with the approval of an overly elaborate road scheme for what is now known as St Frideswide's Square. Earlier road schemes which would also have demolished the LMS station are not described. For example, in 1948 Thomas Sharp in *Oxford Replanned* had imagined the demolition of the Rewley Road station and the complete remodelling of the area, while a summary of subsequent damaging road schemes, including Oxford's 1965 notorious inner urban motorway proposal, can be found in Mark Barrington-Ward's 2009 lecture to the Oxford Civic Society entitled *Forty Years of Oxford Planning: What has it achieved, and what next?* One legacy of these abortive road schemes still survives in the shape of the Rewley Road Fire Station. The fire station's otherwise inexplicable siting is explained by the fact that it was designed to sit adjacent to one of the main interchanges on the proposed motorway so that fire engines could supposedly whisk anywhere in the city in a matter of minutes. Once the inner motorway idea was abandoned various other proposals were brought forward for the station site, including an Asda supermarket. None of these schemes came to fruition, but *Oxford's Transport Strategy* now ominously labelled the area that we now know as St Frideswide's Square as a 'Major junction change'. This new square was to become Oxford's late twentieth-century answer to medieval Carfax, minus the Conduit.

Highway engineers came up with the idea of creating what amounted to a miniature stretch of six-lane urban motorway between Hythe Bridge and Park End Streets to the Botley Road railway bridge. This bizarre scheme proposed not only demolishing the LMS station building, but also the cutting down of ten mature trees. It was this proposal that so enraged Rob Sykes and his fellow conspirators and led to them organising the sit-in protest which is described so well in this book. Some of the protesters had learnt squatting skills two years before on the route of the A34 Newbury by-pass. They were determined to bring the general public's attention to the damage the road scheme would cause. Their aim was to try to prevent the road being built by taking direct action. In parallel, local and national amenity and heritage bodies were opposing the scheme by more conventional methods.

The book describes in graphic detail the occupation of the former station building from 1st May to 9th September 1998. The building and its forecourt trees provided the perfect structures for protest as a performance. The protesters built houses in the canopies of the threatened trees joined by 'stout polyprop rope walkways'. Flower beds were reinstated. The exterior of the station was redecorated in its LMS colours (the recently restored Rewley Road Railway Swing Bridge has been painted in the earlier London and North Western Railway

(LNWR) colour scheme). On the inside 'the humble sofa' became 'a symbol of the occupation' and a key feature of the alternative life-style which quickly developed. Beds were suspended in a net from the ceiling. Communal cooking was arranged and heroin users were evicted. 'Lock-ons' (now illegal) were contrived, including the protesters' signature 'sofa lock-ons'. Under the floor, tunnels were dug, one of which included a false door.

Soon after the occupation began the intervention of Julian Munby of the Oxford Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology) enhanced the protesters' understanding of the historical significance of the Grade 2* listed terminus station. The book provides a brief summary of this significance. The site was originally occupied by Rewley Abbey. The station terminus building was completed in 1851 by the Buckinghamshire Railway as a front for the LNWR which was in turn to become part of the LMS in 1923. The building was designed and built by Fox, Henderson & Co, Engineers, using the same pioneering prefabricated cast iron components that the company had employed in London's Crystal Palace, designed by Joseph Paxton. The fight to save the unique historic structure was thus added to the cause of resisting the road scheme. Julian and his colleagues were later to record and publish an account of the building during its dismantling in *From Studium to Station, Rewley Abbey and Rewley Road Station, Oxford* (Oxford Archaeology Occasional Paper Number 16, 2007).

The author suggests that behind the battle to halt the mini motorway and save the building, the true villain of the piece was the University. The University had accepted a substantial benefaction from Mr Wafic Saïd, 'a Syrian arms fixer', who had brokered the controversial so-called Al Yamamah arms deal. The benefaction was to be spent on the establishment of the Saïd Business School (SBS). The first choice of site for the SBS had been Mansfield Road in North Oxford. This original proposal was rejected and the plan was transferred to the LMS station site. This change of location required the station to be either demolished or removed. The book summarises the political and dubious shenanigans that led to the approval of the scheme. Mr Saïd's dealings had brought him into contact with influential politicians on both sides of the political divide. An unpublished talk by John Ashdown (the city's conservation officer 1972-2000) to the Oxford Civic Society in 2003 (*How Oxford Lost a Listed Building: the Story of the LMS Rewley Road Railway Station*) explained the political intrigues. John's talk also illuminated Mr Saïd's financial gift to English Heritage's fundraising campaign to restore the Albert Memorial in London, which seems to have led to the granting of listed building consent.

What started as an anti-road protest thus morphed into a protest against the building of a university project backed by an arms broker. In other words, the sit-in appeared to be a classic Town versus Gown confrontation. The protest was in a sense a direct descendent of the 1355 St Scholastica's Day Riot and with the same inevitable outcome of a triumphant University. However, by the time the protesters were evicted they had gained the support of many University postgraduates and undergraduates, as well as much of the local community. They had collected 10,000 signatures, displayed a banner on the Sheldonian Theatre to take the fight to the University, and garnered so much media backing that an ITV reporter even tipped them off shortly before the eviction began. The lifting of the siege was curiously led by the Under-Sheriff of Berkshire who had previously led the eviction of the Newbury bypass camps. He was accompanied by hundreds of police, specialist climbers and a 'huge cherry-picker'.

The final configuration of roads in St Frideswide's Square meant that there was never any need to demolish the station and re-erect it off-site at the Buckinghamshire Railway Centre at

Quinton. Rob Sykes calls the result ‘to a significant extent a replica’, based on his reading of Lance Adlam and Bill Simpson’s 2008 book *A Triumph of Restoration, Oxford Rewley Road Station*, and of Julian Munby’s previously mentioned *From Studium to Station*. As for the road layout, a curious feature of the finished, simplified design was the installation of no less than nineteen traffic lights. These lights caused endless hold-ups until they were removed in 2015. Meanwhile, Dixon Jones, the architects of the SBS, came up with a design whose frontage looks ironically like a railway station. More imaginative architects could surely have produced a design that incorporated the listed structure within the new building. As it is, the several blank facades of the building do little to enhance the streetscape. Where Cistercian monks once studied, the world’s future business leaders are now trained.

Protests about Oxford traffic schemes continue to abound whether it be in opposition to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, the Zero Emission Zones, the current absurd delay over Botley Road railway bridge or, the biggest irony of all, the proposed cycle bridge at Oxpens. None of these protests can compare with the LMS Occupation, now happily immortalised in print. The protesters clearly had a very happy and memorable time, and this comes through in the writing. The book is an extremely enjoyable read, very fully referenced and well-illustrated. It is only a pity that some of the photos are not clearer. As for the station itself, only a plaque set in the paving outside the SBS commemorates where it once stood.

Tom Hassall (archaeological consultant and founding director of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology)), 2025